PRACTICAL GUIDE

Neurodivergence and independent churches

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1.0 What is neurodivergence?

Neurodiversity is the natural variation in human brain function and behaviour. It accepts that people think, learn and process information in diverse ways. Neurodivergence refers to specific differences like autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia and Tourette Syndrome. Under the Equality Act 2010 neurodivergence often qualifies as a disability if it has a 'substantial' and 'long term' impact on someone's ability to carry out normal day to day activities. However, many individuals have differing views on whether neurodivergent traits make them 'disabled', and do not want to be labelled at such. Whatever view we may have, it is important for churches to be aware of neurodivergence, to take practical steps to fully involve people with neurodivergence and to remember that they are created in God's image, are part of God's plans, have a vital role to play in the Body of Christ and are loved beyond measure by God.

2.0 Why should your church be aware of neurodivergence?

Neurodivergent individuals and their families can struggle to feel comfortable in many congregations because of noise, an expectation to sit still, facility limitations and other unwritten expectations relating to behaviour. As each individual is made in the image of God, he/she matters and should be encouraged and enabled to be fully part of the Church/Body of Christ. Often individuals have unique strengths that can be put to good use within a local church. For example, those with ADHD may demonstrate hyperfocus, emotional sensitivity and creativity which can enhance ministry tasks and evangelism. Autistic members of the church may bring attention to detail, consistency and unique perspective that enrich group activities and leadership roles. Recognising and valuing these strengths helps the church benefit from diverse gifts.

Educating and training leaders, welcome and pastoral teams and indeed the whole church is important, not only to understand the condition, but also to show those with neurodivergence that they are valued. It is ideal that neurodivergent people can be involved in the training, as they will be able to explain how they think and feel.

3.0 Practical tips

There are a number of ways that your church can help neurodivergent people and others in the church. Often these do not require expense or major changes to how things are done.

3.1 Website

Make clear to people accessing your church website what activities you provide and what you are expecting of people in order to join in with these activities. Clear easy to read English and an accessible sans serif font will help everyone to read, making it clear to people they are welcome and that you genuinely want to include everyone. Making clear what disability access and facilities you have will make people with disabilities feel welcomed. This could include that you provide accessible parking spaces, ramped or level access (as well as steps), chairs with arms for those that need the extra pushing up power, the type of hearing induction loop that you have and which spaces this works in, as well as whether there are large print books and other materials you can offer.

A clear address and map of how to get to your building should be shown on the website, along with photographs of the car park, building and main rooms, showing people where they should park (including accessible parking spaces), showing the location of WCs and other

information you think will be useful and help people to confidently join in your activities.

3.2 Communication and information

The recommended format for notices and posters to help people with dyslexia, and dyscalculia is sans serif font, avoiding italics and all capitals (uppercase), and having large font (at least 12 point). Additionally, writing numbers in both numerical and word format (e.g. 4 (Four)) can help individuals with dyscalculia. This should also be incorporated into Power point or projected words.

With print outs, notice sheets etc it may be useful to have a summary sheet containing only key information making sure that sentences are short and simple, that no sentences are in all capital letters and ideally should be printed on off-white paper. Coloured overlays are possibly the best well known aid for individuals living with dyslexia as they assist people by highlighting the words on paper, making it easier to read. Multiple overlays can be obtained online relatively cheaply and they can make a massive improvement for people reading printouts, service sheets or notices and for also reading any church bibles.

Offering multiple modes of communication, such as visual aids and videos, as well as written materials, ensures that as many people as possible can engage meaningfully with your activities.

3.3 Sensory friendly environments

Consider how you can create a sensory friendly environment. This may be offering a quiet space or a sensory room where individuals can take breaks if overwhelmed by harsh lighting, loud music and other sensory triggers in worship times. You may also wish to adapt worship and church activities, offering different service formats, such as shorter meetings or live-streamed options for those who find crowds difficult. Clearly signpost to these quieter spaces and even consider offering ear plugs or noise cancelling headphones for livelier meetings and events.

It may also be appropriate to adjust lighting, avoiding overly bright lights and flashing, as well as reducing noise levels by keeping music at a reasonable volume. It may also be possible to adapt worship formats and church activities, perhaps offering alternatives that may be more sensory friendly.

3.4 Social interaction

Many neurodivergent people love being sociable, but they may become overwhelmed quickly and this can result in them leaving meetings early or otherwise pacing themselves. Autistic people for example may use a different social communication method, sometimes using technology to speak for them and avoiding eye contact. Rather than assuming that people are being rude and insisting on one type of communication method, people are encouraged to be curious about what works for others. When communicating with people with neurodivergence do so clearly and be prepared to repeat instructions or break them down to easier steps if someone needs that.

Some neurodivergent people do not like physical contact, sometimes because this is overwhelming and other times because this is painful. Ensure that there are other ways of greeting people rather than only handshakes or hugs.

3.5 Other tips

Here are a few other tips on ensuring people with neurodivergence feel welcomed and included:

- **Clocks**
  Removal of worship area clocks that are visible to the main congregation can help people who have difficulty maintaining attention. Removing the clock helps to create an enclosed immersive atmosphere for some individuals.

- **Phone storage**
  Mobile phone storage can also be helpful. Individuals with attention difficulties look for any form of stimuli to occupy their brain during a long period of listening. Offering a space to store phones safely means individuals do not have the temptation to get their mobiles out during a sermon and start scrolling through social media. It is important that phone storage is not made compulsory, as some people use their phone to interact with the service and others may have anxiety about being away from their mobiles.

- **Welcome the use of personal aids**
  Create an environment where people can feel comfortable using their own aids. These might include overlays, dictation devices or ear defenders. If they feel awkward using these, they are unlikely to do so. Creating a reassuring environment will help people not to feel afraid or awkward about using them.

- **Fidgets**
  You could provide fidgets, such as finger labyrinths, tangles or heart shaped stress balls, as keeping their body active can also make it easier to keep their brains focused. Avoid fidgets that make noise or resemble balls that beg to be thrown.

- **Colouring pages**
  Colouring pages relating to bible passages, blank paper for open creativity, colouring pens etc for use during worship can be useful for children and adults. Having a place to post these expressions of worship would validate this activity.

- **Friendship table**
  If a friendship table or bench can be provided for people who find it difficult to start conversations this will enable them to sit and indicate they enjoy socialising but need someone else to start the conversations. Adding a puzzle or Lego to the table can make it easier to be together without intense eye contact.

3.6 Changing the culture

If your church fosters a culture that talks openly about neurodiversity, this encourages understanding among all members. Training staff and volunteers with guidance from neurodivergent-led teams can improve awareness and sensitivity and, asking neurodivergent members directly about their needs and preferences, ensures that accommodations are effective and respectful.

There are simple things that you can do to create a safe and empowering community of faith that does not just accommodate or confine neurodivergent, that brings out the best in each person. This could include planning diverse activities and utilising a variety of communication methods to match different learning styles. You can also encourage people

to adjust their expectations. This could include for example understanding that some physical movements and vocal outburst are ticks (e.g. If someone shouts 'no!' when they are nervous this may not be because they are defiant). Another example would be not assuming that everyone can read well, as reading the bible out loud can be terrifying for someone who is dyslexic.

It would also be helpful to offer support, considering options to reduce distress that may be caused by noise, silence, uncertainty and social interaction. Encouraging people to be curious can also help them understand what someone is going through. When someone is obviously uncomfortable, asking what they are experiencing and trying to learn from that can be helpful to both people. It is possible for churches to be more inclusive, aware and sensitive to people with neurodivergence and to ensure that they know that they are welcome and a vital part of the church.

4.0 Additional information

Here are a few links to websites and resources that can be helpful in thinking through your responsibilities and providing tools that may help you love and welcome people with neurodivergence.

Respecting Neurodiversity in the Church - The Disability and Faith Forum: disabilityandfaith.org/respecting-neurodiversity-in-the-church

ADDitude - ADD & ADHD Symptom Tests, Signs, Treatment, Support: additudemag.com
This website has some personal help and resources for those with ADHD

British Dyslexia Association: bdadyslexia.org.uk

National Autistic Society: autism.org.uk

ADHD Awareness Month: adhdawarenessmonth.org

ADHD Foundation: adhdfoundation.org.uk